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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5267
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RUEHRA/AMEMBASSY RIGA 1758
RUEHVL/AMEMBASSY VILNIUS 3792
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1320
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
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RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

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SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: PROTESTANTS PREPARED TO "FIGHT UNTIL THE END" TO
SAVE CHURCH

Ref: A) MINSK 957

B) MINSK 1119

Summary

1. (SBU) On October 21, approximately 600 people gathered in Minsk to protest the GOB's confiscation of the New Life Church's (NLC) property. Amidst heavy security presence, NLC Senior Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko called on the people to defend their right to freedom of religion. On October 17, the NLC filed an appeal of the GOB's decision upon recommendations from the Presidential Administration. Despite rumors that Lukashenko supports the NLC's claim against the Minsk City authorities, Goncharenko promised to continue protesting, including the ongoing nationwide hunger strike, until the GOB returns the NLC's property. The NLC's struggle has increasingly attracted domestic and international attention and support, particularly as the hunger strike continues. End summary.

Heavy Police Presence Did Not Deter NLC Demonstrators

2. (U) On October 21, approximately 500-600 people gathered at Friendship Park to protest the GOB's forced sale of the NLC building (ref A). The crowd of families waved flags and banners, which demanded the government reverse its decision on the NLC's building and called for religious freedom in Belarus. Senior Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko thanked the people for their support and pledged to continue their protests until the authorities return the building to the NLC. He asked the crowd to adopt a resolution to defend their right to freedom of religion in Belarus, which the crowd readily accepted. Representatives from the Union of Full Gospel Churches, the Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith, and the Russian Assembly of God participated in the demonstration.

3. (SBU) Poloffs observed a significant security presence during the demonstration, including three police buses, two police jeeps, and one two-ton prison vehicle on alert approximately 500 meters from the park. Two riot police officers stood on the periphery of the demonstration for

half of the demonstration. In order to maintain order, the NLC took its own "crowd-control" precautions with ushers patrolling the park and announcements asking participants not to wave flags with unregistered symbols.

All Was Peaceful Back at the Building

14. (SBU) Despite the concerns of some church leaders, the authorities made no attempt to gain control of the NLC building while the majority of the community was at the demonstration. However, the community had taken extra precautions to protect its property, including limiting access to the site and the road leading to the building and registering all guests. Poloff, who visited the building during the demonstration, estimated approximately 60 people remained behind.

Meeting with GOB Leads to Another Appeal

15. (U) The demonstration followed Goncharenko's October 17 meeting with Presidential Administration Main Ideology Officer Oleg Proleskovskiy about the Minsk City Executive Committee's decision to confiscate the NLC's building and land. Proleskovskiy told Goncharenko that Lukashenko was aware of the NLC's situation and considers it a "normal church in need of assistance." Proleskovskiy insisted that this matter could only be solved through legal means and urged Goncharenko to again turn to the courts but did not offer any guarantees. On October 18, the NLC filed an appeal on the government's decision with the Supreme Economic Court.

Protests Will Continue Until Building is Returned to NLC

16. (U) At a press conference on October 19, Goncharenko noted that the GOB has previously made promises that went unfulfilled. In an effort to ensure a victorious outcome, Goncharenko pledged that the NLC would not stop its hunger strike until it has full ownership of its building and land. Over 200 people, including many from churches around the country, have participated in a hunger strike since October 5 to protest the forced sale of the building. Approximately 30 of the hunger strikers and 70 church members remain at the NLC building as part of a round-the-clock vigil. According to the NLC's press release, 36 people in cities throughout Belarus are also on hunger strike to support the NLC. On October 19, Dr. Artem Adamenko, a Baptist physician who has volunteered to monitor the health of the hunger strikers, stated that the hunger strikers had problems with blood pressure, but that most were healthy. [Note: The state doctors and ambulances have refused to conduct examinations on the hunger strikers unless there is a medical emergency. End note.]

Support for NLC Grows In and Out of Belarus

17. (U) The NLC's struggle continues to attract domestic and international attention and support. On October 18, Pastor Dmitriy Lazuta called on the 450 members of his Annunciation Church of the Union of Evangelical Baptist Christians in Belarus to observe a one-day fast to show their solidarity with the NLC. Letters of support have arrived from all around the world, including the U.S, Europe, and Africa. NLC press spokesperson Inna Davydovich stated that U.S. Protestant believers appealed to their Congressional representatives to assist the church. [Note: We have already responded to one such inquiry. End note.] At the October 19 press conference, Pastor Goncharenko expressed his gratitude for all the encouragement the church has received. He noted that the NLC is willing to accept all support regardless of political views, citing the example of a monetary donation from the state run Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) that the church received.

NLC Threatens State Television with Libel Suit

18. (U) On October 20, New Life sent a letter to state television "STV" demanding that the network grant the NLC airtime to refute the allegations about the hunger strike protest. The NLC threatened to open a libel case against STV if the network did not comply. The NLC's letter followed STV journalist Lyudmila Dzhurayeva's report on the NLC hunger strike entitled, "Strange Worshippers of a No Less Strange Religion," which slandered the NLC's beliefs and members. STV broadcast the report on October 14 and 15 after the NLC denied STV's news crew access to its building.

Comment

19. (SBU) The NLC's demonstration was extremely well-organized, with designated volunteers performing crowd control, registering participants, and distributing information. Music greeted the families as they started arriving 30 minutes before the scheduled start time. The demonstrators did not appear to be intimidated by the heavy security presence and instead held large, professionally-made signs demanding the regime reverse its decision and abide by the Belarusian constitution. The increased security presence suggests that the authorities take the NLC's actions seriously. Yet, despite promising words from the government and increased displays of domestic and international support, the outcome for the NLC remains uncertain. While the NLC's meeting with the GOB indicates a willingness on both sides to have an open dialogue, Goncharenko recognizes that the regime has previously failed to follow through on good faith gestures (ref B), making the NLC's decision to "fight until the end" a prudent if not desperate tactic.

STEWART